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### Twenty-Six Poems

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**TWENTY-SIX POEMS**

**J. Brant Judkins**

I began this project with the supposition that compiling a collection of my college poetry would not be too time-consuming and would require a minimal amount of effort. I surmised that since I had completed most of the task over the past five years, all I had to do was type up some of my work, write some brief, explanatory introduction, and voila, finis. Well, I was, as usual, rather naive and foolish in my expectations. I have spent far too much time agonizing (pardon the clichéd melodrama) over which poems to include, how to order them, how to revise certain aspects of the poems that I despised, and so forth, and I have wound up with a compilation of texts which I do not consistently like or dislike. I am never ambivalent towards them, but rather fluctuate between disgust and unwarranted pride. But from this struggle (?), I have come to see that the works themselves are not of primary importance. Rather, it is the process of creation, the acts of memory and imagination, the catharsis of love, hate, suffering, et cetera, which are what poetry is all about. Not the product, not the printed word, but rather the action of composing -- the process of art. What exists on paper is of minimal significance. People who read it, if indeed anyone reads it at all, may like or dislike what I have to say. But I really do not give a damn. This is not the hated and feared invocation of "art for art's sake" -- it is art for my sake. Perhaps I am a selfish bastard, but that really is not the point. I write for myself, and I would guess that anyone who writes, deep down, feels the same. Poets are not, as Shelley would have it, "the unacknowledged legislators of the world." They are, perhaps moreso than any other kind of artist, the most self-consumed and narcissistic sons-of-bitches the world has ever known. But again, that is not the point.

Poetry, for me, is a glorious purging, an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual regurgitation. I can write and hate and love and lust without reproach. I can amuse myself with my own pitiful intellectualizing of the good, the bad, and the ugly that is the universe, and none

will ever be the wiser. I can do as I please and none will suffer as a result of my actions (or lack thereof). That, however, is only the tip of the proverbial iceberg. There is the profundity that exists beneath the surface of composition. I can return to my work, three or four years after having written it, and I can see myself as I could not at that moment of my living. I read many of these poems and wonder how I ever came to be the person that wrote them. The experience is one of having a conversation with my younger self, and there is a certain wisdom to be gained from this exercise. In the past, for example, I have been profoundly depressed (haven't we all) for prolonged periods of time. In reading my writings, I can simultaneously see how warped and misguided my thought processes were at that moment, and I can also understand with greater clarity and sympathy how I came to be as I was. As such, when I encounter those moments in my future living, I may be able to work through them more effectively and more rapidly, and even if I cannot, then at least I will know what artistic elixir I need to maintain my sanity.

What I submit here in the physical form of these poems is not even half of the project I have undergone. Indeed, it is a pitiful representation of my actual lived experience. Let me offer an oblique example to illustrate my point. Frequently, when we see or hear or read about those others of us who "take up serpents in the name of the Lord," we react with shock or judgmental laughter or some other wholly inappropriate emotion or gesture. In so doing, we tend to overlook the experience, indeed the rapture, with which these individuals participate in life. Surely, though, this is as close to the divine that we will ever come in this world. Their hearts must be pounding in terror and faith to the point where they can hear the very blood flowing through their veins. They must be so entirely consumed in the act of living that the world has all but disappeared for them. Indeed, time has vanished and immersed what we know as the "individual" within itself. The same might be said of the Bacchanals or the Whirling Dervishes

or the poet. At that moment of creation, time and space are insignificant and the beautiful union of life and living is complete. To be able to submit my experience -- that is, the rapture of creation -- is singularly impossible. But that is what I feel this project is all about. So as you read these words or, for that matter, the words of any other individual, do not be blinded by the opacity of the page. Rather, wrap yourself in the blanket of their experience. Search for that common ground and cross that transcendental bridge between those two "souls", for lack of a better word. Understand the words, the moment, and the person as Whitman would have it in "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry."

Closer yet I approach you,  
What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you--I laid in my stores  
in advance,  
I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.  
Who was to know what should come home to me?  
Who knows, but I am enjoying this?  
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking at you now,  
for all you cannot see me?

## **THE PLAN**

I was conceived  
-- some two decades ago --  
of thought and passion:  
rarest rejuvenation  
of misunderstood matrimony.

Sometimes  
I wish they'd just bought a dog.

## **METAPHOR OF A LIE**

Penetration --  
The first deep, comforting kiss,  
Assuring you  
That this is the struggle of lovers.

**sex last october**

nothing was easy and i felt like a dog  
writhing on flaccid terror.



### **ANTIQUATED MEMORY**

She stared bluey at me  
from her denim shirt  
and porcelain smile,  
Piercing my mind  
with the ornate blade  
of easy beauty:  
Reminiscent of a topless day  
when passion rose and fell  
breathing its last strong breath  
like a dying wind.

## **212°FAHRENHEIT PLUS ONE FOR THE ROAD**

I saw I was a primate today.  
Young and strong, virile like a black-backed ape,  
Striving to find a reason to fuck anything  
That moves or breathes or smells like cheap perfume.

It doesn't make me feel like some surreal champion of the sky  
Hurling milky thunderbolts into the tangible oblivion;  
No, It just felt good.  
(*It* is a pronoun meaning my hand or pillow  
Or any uncontested orifice of female flesh.)

All the blood in my brain  
Has rushed like a red Niagara  
To six inches of flesh  
Where I spend (on a good day) the entire day  
Biding my time in uncertain ceremony  
Guaranteed to substantiate  
My waxing manhood.

## **RECOLLECTIONS IN FEBRUARY**

Time has passed these past five months  
Like a father's misunderstood love for his pubescent daughter

And these five months I have seen the shrivelled embers of Autumn  
Scattered brown and lifeless near the cool blue flame of your eyes

And these five months I have seen the snow  
Drifting into the pale golden leaves of your hair

And I have looked in the blue ages of your eyes  
And we have been alone in one another

And we have grown old  
We have grown old as light

And we are young  
We are young as dawn.

## **INSIGHT**

I saw you last night in my sleep  
And felt your warm, soft touch  
And knew the safety of your embrace.

I felt my soul at ease  
And loved you  
Like a blind man loves the night sky.

I felt the heat of your body  
As we made love  
In a pool of brilliant, shimmering light;

We touched and loved and never said goodbye.

I awoke and loved momentarily, blissfully,  
And remembered and hated you  
Like a blind man hates the night sky.

## **AFFECTIONATE BARBEQUE**

In my darker, sadder,  
more stunningly stereotypical breaths  
I sometimes wonder if I seldom loved you

And often  
    merely  
        simply  
            sincerely  
                Just wanted to fuck you;

Or if I often loved you  
and just wanted to own you  
like some dog  
from my pre-masturbatory minutes  
that would submit  
and let me fuck it  
for a little bit of affectionate barbeque.

## UTILITARIAN LUST

Plastic ecstasy;  
passion as if reflex,  
instinct after instinct,  
thrust after thrust:  
the wooden nickel of spent flesh.

An evolutionary exercise  
in necessary futility  
adapted to reconcile  
the surreal reason  
of a logical primate  
with the innate purity  
of a selfish gene.

On the periphery of thought  
I love you confusedly  
Without the confusion of your presence.

Night before night before last  
After the best, most thoughtless part of the evening,  
When you wrapped your naked self in my blanket,  
And laid your head on my quilted shoulder,  
And reminded me of how I repulsed you,

I knew I had become a fetus of a man:  
Weak and dependent,  
Huddled over a spark of awareness  
That makes this love seem so wrong.

**FOR T. R. R., August 1993**

So often dreams are dreamed of you.  
Your slight smile and knowing eyes  
Healing our surreal past:

The only woman I've ever loved  
Who might have loved me back  
Now forgotten daily with the dawn.

Contentedness could lie in sleep  
If I didn't know the difference  
Between contentedness and reality.

But reality is an unaccepted fog,  
So very traditional that it no longer makes sense.  
Yet sense and suffering

Together cloned, and reeking with the glow of reality,  
Lose their transcendence  
And become the stuff of breathing.



### **DOUBLE NEGATIVE**

Dusk slithers the day into new oblivion  
Dimming me youthward to dream  
The pure, unsophisticated dream of a thoughtful child.

Seeing yesterday's trees cool in a blanket of sleepy sunlight  
Reminds me that youth was never neither  
Always innocent, nor gay or blissful,  
Nor never naught but newly sad;  
But rather that even new grief can be fresh and calming,  
So unlike the anticipated sadness of tomorrow.

## **JUXTAPOSITION**

Creation and ReCreation --  
the brief falsification of moonlight  
for the spectral, torpid outpourings  
of the heart;

The dull, omnipotent madness  
of disheveled love, unrequitable, irreconcilable  
with the cool swift irregularity of the wind:

The unduly embrace of passion and reason  
like the song of the plowman  
and the song of the plow.

## **CYNICAL ARMCHAIR**

Solitude, solace,  
imperfect vicarious grief  
through the eyes of the oppressed  
in the mind of the oppressor;

Empathy dripping the irregular drip  
in an imagined cavern  
forming stalactites of apathy  
                    stalagmites of gratification:  
A bulwark against action and reality.

Hope gradualizing into a painful surrealism:  
A maelstrom of thought and tears  
beyond tears, conceptualizing three,  
four circumventions of calloused reality

In the plush, posh recliner  
of suburban empathy  
where retribution gleams  
in the mind of the oppressor,  
far from the eyes of the oppressed.

**OCTOBER TOMORROW**  
**(1993)**

October tomorrow and nothing has changed.

Time  
like a terminal disease

For the elderly man whose children have gone.

In the cool, bladder-filled tension of morning,  
I awoke from a dreamless, drunken stupor  
To find my life  
the same.

The clock won't stall for thought

Still  
I am stagnant in my pedantic hatred,

Firmly rooted  
in obstinate impotence

Like the young yellow poplar  
that will not bend with the wind

Dying in this dying world  
where nothing is resolved.

October tomorrow and nothing has changed.

## **SLEEPWALKING**

Happiness only in contrast:  
Frightened, like first Christmas for a child,  
I stumble into the darkness of a new morning  
To find gifts long dreamed of,

Not by myself, but by others.  
And other's dreams become a celibate reality  
As I want nothing of these planned gifts,  
For I am a surreal child

And live in a self-illuminated world  
Somnambulistic among the heavy-minded  
Realists who find comfort in the afterlife  
Where wise men never tread.

## **RAPTURE ON THE CORNER OF GAY STREET AND JACKSON AVENUE**

Concentric circles of tired time  
perpetually sway me  
to uniform escapism  
Like the swift translucent breeze  
freeing the detritus  
of an Autumn Leaf  
Into the omniscient oblivion  
that has always been  
The stuff of stars.

## **SUBLIMATION**

When it is poetry  
And the pain is twisted,  
Contorted on the page,  
I think of Freud and sublimation  
    knowing something of the animosity  
    and the fear  
With which we so collectively  
Whimper and snarl  
When faced with the truth.

## WALLOWING IN JULY

Dead four years  
And I can't cry enough.

Dead four years  
And God is fantasy.

Dead four years  
And Sis slit her wrists.

Dead four years  
And Mom's breasts are gone.

Dead four years  
And I gotta laugh at all this shit.



## CONFRONTATION

So what  
if he doesn't love Jesus anymore  
and fellates hapless young bucks  
with jackhammer cocks  
in the twilight intimacy of the forest floor  
where dicks sprout like portabella mushrooms

So what  
if he goes home and everyone stares  
at everyone else and pretends to be staring  
at the heirloomed lawn jockey  
or the 700 Club,  
thinking all the while  
Can dogs get into Heaven?

So what  
if after a while  
all the repression creeps to the surface  
like a political leviathan,  
like the truth about Watergate  
or another Kennedy rape  
and you say "Goddammit mom,  
Dick's just pussy on a stick."

### CONVERSATION WITH CARSON

She sprawled too comfortably on the dingy castaneous carpet,  
Plaguing me with the incessant rubbing  
Of her folds of supposedly sumptuous cellulite,  
Gazing hungrily with her emaciated pupils  
Into the wide, misunderstanding chasm of my eyes,  
-- Waiting impatiently for her gray-chested lover to appear  
Like some Appalachian Lot, drunken with thoughts of unripe flesh --  
And shared with me the entirety of her life.

She spoke coldly, rationally,  
With the confidence of repetition  
Of her father molesting her younger self,  
And trading her hymen for a white Toyota  
In which she visits men her father's age  
To make love,  
Receive a new ring for one of her three ringless fingers,  
And drive home, only to wake up the next morning  
Wondering which part was a dream.

## MIDDLE-AGED MATRIMONY

The groom stood tall, bald and frightened  
And very nearly whimpered his vows.

The pastor chiselled the words of the marital dirge  
With the sound of Luther's hammer  
Nailing his Theses on Wittenberg's door.

He was squat and balding  
And his eyes were narrowed and gleaming  
Like the distant reflection of a point of light.

You had grown great with the years,  
Pregnant with the memories  
Of an adulterous divorce,  
the loss of a son who carried black dolls  
to all-white schools  
for a brutal day of show and tell,  
And the lithium-withered liver  
Of your mother's bipolar soul.

Time had not been the carpenter of your dreams.  
Your girlhood mansion was become a double-wide trailer  
And your flesh hung uneasily from your bones  
Like Spanish moss in the boughs of oaks.

But you were there:  
In the threshold,  
On the aisle,  
At the altar;  
You carried with you the myth of rejuvenation  
Like some sacred duffel bag  
Filled with the hope of new beginnings,

And you shed a tear along with your vows  
Which may have been in joy or in sorrow,  
Or merely in some wise mélange of the two.

## THANKSGIVING -- 1995

There was the weekend  
With ludicrous old bitter women:  
their shrivelled selves supported only  
by last year's Christmas sweaters  
like some purgatorial crucifixion  
suspended so Dali-esque  
as to conceal support from supported.

When they spoke their creek of regrets  
--their words trickling from their mouths,  
gently reflecting the dusky sunlight--  
their wrinkled faces moving in unison  
like the motion of tired venetian blinds,  
with murmurs of Cranston and Leon and Mother  
who had potatoes with every meal  
and always cleared the dishes before supper was over  
and died so surreptitiously that her passing  
was like a miasmic sunrise,

Death was under their tongues  
speaking almost as an afterthought  
of their own incandescent decay.

But the turkey was nonetheless passed  
and the false cheer of alcohol was made  
and the absence of the long dead was somberly recognized  
and the tick-tock of the grandfather clock  
counted the passing mouthfuls  
of this ritual of confusion and memory  
until the false flesh of holiday orgasm was spent.

## THE TONIC OF WILDNESS

*Logic and reason never convince,  
The damp of night drives deeper into my soul.  
-- Walt Whitman*

Up through the violets and trillium,  
Past the bloodroot and golden dandelion,  
To the mossy rockface and gently cascading waterfall,  
-- where your quiet ashes shall flow --  
We rested and spoke of existence.

We were Socratic in our refusal to assert the Truth:  
Affirming the distortion of the bough-broken sunlight on current creekwater,  
Denying the rock's lack of animate reality --  
A refusal of reconciliation in the minds of ineffectual intellectuals.  
Everything Natural was made Artificial.

But the bright breeze still windburned my pallid nose  
And blew the freshly clipped hair from your prognathous ears  
And made the fine hair in the microscopic depths of my nose  
Bend in surprise at the fresh ease of Spring.

Sometimes in the brittle skeletons of the leaves  
I wonder at the aberration of consciousness --  
at the natural schizophrenia of Being;  
I wonder at my rational myopia:  
Where is the sun that will burn the film of reason from my eyes?

I am Oedipus in my natural ramblings.  
Blind with the enlightenment of Science,  
I am sightless with silly, paradigmatic, anthropomorphic fears;  
This same mossy stone breathes my atoms more slowly,  
So I quickly call it "insensate" and sew another stitch into my blanket or reason  
Where I am warm and safe in its cotton womb of logic.

Our minds have sauntered far now, even to the Holy Land,  
But the subtle rapture of universal pantheism is brief for me,  
The wildflowers sing their Latin names and drum my academic tympanum.  
Malleus, incus, stapes ring and hum this fragile cochlea of Being  
into Koyanisqatsii -- Life out of Balance.

I have made my existential diagnosis;  
Where is the transcendental elixir to calm my trembling nerves?  
Where is the diaphanous narcotic to reveal the beautiful error of my ways?

### **SAMSARIC RESOLUTION**

Here is both the bang and the whimper:  
The smooth, even taste of gun-metal gray  
Like the sour burn of good whiskey;  
Pacifier, umbilical cord of self-pity --

The tender, brittle moments  
Of grief's rapid, linear ancestry  
Funnelling into the tunnel vision of logic,  
                  into the purity of reason,

Like the cycle of Samsara  
-- The Wheel of Life --  
Here is both the bang and the whimper.

### **AMBIVALENT PARTING**

As you walked away  
I felt like a child  
Watching melting snow  
In the bright sunlight,  
Still uncertain and afraid  
Of tomorrow's colorful barrenness.